



**QAA**

# **Outcomes from institutional audit**

## **The self-evaluation document in institutional audit**

### **Second series**



**Sharing good practice**

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2009

ISBN 978 1 84482 907 1

All QAA's publications are available on our website [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

### Summary

This paper is based on the 59 institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006. Throughout this time the self-evaluation document was the starting point and a key source of information for the institutional audit process. Many audit teams also found that it provided an early indication of an institution's capacity to explain and evaluate its management and enhancement of the quality of students' learning opportunities and its capacity to assure the academic standards of its awards.

In the institutional audit process, features of good practice highlight aspects of an institution's activity which could be considered transferable to other institutions. Hence, it is not surprising that a self-evaluation document was linked with a feature of good practice on only one occasion. However, in four other cases the self-evaluation document was described in very positive terms in the audit report. No report links a self-evaluation document to a recommendation.

In more than half the audit reports analysed in this paper, the self-evaluation document was considered to be both accurate and self-evaluative, while in almost all the remainder of the reports the self-evaluation document was described as accurate but no more than partially self-evaluative. In one case a report described the relevant self-evaluation document as self-evaluative but not wholly accurate. A very small number of reports considered the self-evaluation document to be neither self-evaluative nor accurate.

Many audit reports commented on the comprehensiveness of self-evaluation documents. In most cases the reports stated that self-evaluation documents were either 'comprehensive' or 'full'. Only a few reports explicitly stated that the self-evaluation document had been found not to be comprehensive.

In the large majority of audit reports, the self-evaluation document was described using positive adjectives such as 'frank', 'honest' and 'self-critical' although in a small number of cases the self-evaluation document was considered not to have done justice to the institution, either by excessive self-criticism or by not drawing attention to areas of strength. This paper notes that less than a third of the reports raised questions about a claim made in a self-evaluation document. Of these, the main areas in which reports disagreed with self-evaluation documents related to approval, monitoring and review processes; aspects of the interface between individual institutions and their students; and how well aspects of the Academic Infrastructure had been embedded in institutions' procedures.

In most of the audit reports there is some reference to a comment in the self-evaluation document in which the institution is critical of its own practice or procedure. The topics which the self-critical comments cover fall into two main themes: quality management (with a notable emphasis on management information systems) and communication with students. Staff development was also the subject of a number of self-critical comments.

The findings of this paper compare closely with those of its counterpart in Series 1. On the whole, the audit reports indicate that the self-evaluation document served its purpose in the institutional audit process providing, in most cases, an honest, accurate and self-evaluative account of an institution's procedures.

### Preface

An objective of institutional audit is 'to contribute, in conjunction with other mechanisms, to the promotion and enhancement of high-quality in teaching and learning'. To provide institutions and other stakeholders with access to timely information on the findings of its institutional audits, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) produces short working papers that describe features of good practice and summarise recommendations from the audit reports. Since 2005 these have been published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit* (hereafter, *Outcomes...*). The first series of these papers drew on the findings of the audit reports published between 2003 and November 2004. This paper is based on the findings of the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006.

A feature of good practice in institutional audit is considered to be a process, a practice, or a way of handling matters which, in the context of the particular institution, is improving, or leading to the improvement of, the management of quality and/or academic standards, and learning and teaching. *Outcomes...* papers are intended to provide readers with pointers to where features of good practice relating to particular topics can be located in the published audit reports. Each *Outcomes...* paper therefore identifies the features of good practice in individual reports associated with the particular topic and their location in the main report. Since only one feature of good practice was linked to the self-evaluation document in the audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006, this paper also identifies where features of individual self-evaluation documents were reported particularly positively in the reports (see paragraphs 9-10).

It should be emphasised that the features of good practice and other positive comments mentioned in this paper should be considered in their proper institutional context, and that each is perhaps best viewed as a stimulus to reflection and further development rather than as a model for emulation. A note on the topics identified for this second series of *Outcomes...* papers can be found at Appendix 3 (page 21).

As noted above, this second series of *Outcomes...* papers is based on the 59 institutional audit reports published by August 2006, and the titles of papers are in most cases the same as their counterparts in the first series of *Outcomes...*. Like the first series of *Outcomes...* papers, those in the second series are perhaps best seen as 'work in progress'. Although QAA retains copyright in the contents of the *Outcomes...* papers, they can be freely downloaded from the QAA website and cited, with acknowledgement for educational and research purposes.

## Introduction and general overview

1 This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 59 institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006. It should be noted, however, that an institutional self-evaluation document (often abbreviated as SED in the audit reports) was only produced for 57 of the audits. The two exceptions were where an institutional audit was combined with an application for degree-awarding powers. In these two instances, a critical self-analysis was produced by the institution, written to different guidelines and to serve a different purpose than the self-evaluation document. In each case the contents of the critical self-analysis were referred to in ways that differed from the practice followed in the other 57 institutional audit reports and for this reason they have been excluded from the following analysis. A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in this second *Outcomes...* series can be found in Appendix 4 (page 23).

2 It should also be noted that this paper is concerned only with the institutional self-evaluation document, not the separate discipline self-evaluation documents (DSEDs) produced for each discipline audit trail followed during the audit. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that it is the institutional audit reports which constitute the source material for this study - no self-evaluation documents themselves were consulted. This is because self-evaluation documents are formally confidential to the institution and the individual audit team and while many institutions published their self-evaluation document on their own websites, not all did so. The evidence on which this paper draws therefore reflects the way in which the contents of self-evaluation documents are incorporated into the audit reports. It is possible that other self-evaluation documents may have included similar material to that discussed here, but this paper confines its analysis to statements from or about self-evaluation documents published in the audit reports.

3 QAA's mission is to 'safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education'. It does this by working with higher education institutions (which are individually responsible for the quality of their provision and the academic standards of the awards to which that provision leads) to define academic standards and quality against which to carry out academic audits of institutions. The findings of these audits, the main outcome of which is a judgement as to the level of confidence that can be ascribed to the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of students' learning opportunities and the standards of academic awards, are published in institutional audit reports.

4 In the period covered by this paper, the starting point for each institutional audit was a self-evaluation of the institution's arrangements and their effectiveness, written by the institution concerned. The *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002) described the self-evaluation document as 'a key reference point for the audit team' which either provided the necessary information to support the audit or pointed to where that information could be found in supporting documentation. It stated that the self-evaluation should reflect the focus in audit on 'the institution's own methods for assuring the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards, and on its published information about quality and standards' (*Handbook*, Annex B, paragraph 1).

5 Accordingly, it was noted in the *Handbook* that self-evaluation documents 'should provide sufficient description to enable the audit team to understand the key features of the institution's approach to assuring quality and securing standards, but should focus on the effectiveness of that approach. Where the institution expresses confidence in its own effectiveness, the evidence upon which its view is based should be made clear: a successful SED will minimise the need for further clarification by the team. Because it is largely upon the SED that the team's perceptions of, and confidence in, the institution will be based (at least in the first instance), it is important that the SED is both accurate and verifiable' (*Handbook*, Annex B, paragraph 5).

6 Hence, the central function of the self-evaluation document was to provide a succinct but comprehensive and accurate account of the institution's procedures. It was expected to contain sufficient descriptive material to enable the audit team to understand the institution's key strategic objectives and operational procedures and sufficient analysis and self-evaluation to identify matters of significance picked up by the institution itself. The underlying expectation was that, within sensible bounds, institutions would be willing to present to QAA audit teams not only their strengths but also any areas of unresolved difficulty.

7 This approach was intended to enable audit teams to come to a view on the level of confidence that could reasonably be placed in the institution's present and likely future management of quality and standards. This was reflected in QAA's indicative report structure where the 'findings' section of the institutional audit report included the heading 'the utility of the SED as an illustration of the institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to act on these to enhance quality and standards' (see the *Handbook*, Annex H). Additional guidance was provided in the QAA report template that this section should include a 'view of the clarity, accuracy and comprehensiveness of the SED, particularly as a vehicle for demonstrating the institution's capacity for self-evaluation'. The expectation was that the audit report would also identify omissions, inaccuracies or poorly supported judgements in the self-evaluation document. Consequently, this paper draws heavily on this section of the 57 audit reports analysed, particularly in paragraphs 11-20 which review the contribution made to the audit process by institutions' self-evaluation documents and considers the degree to which such documents were reported to be evaluative and comprehensive.

8 Under the heading 'the utility of the SED...', a section in each audit report offered an overall view of the self-evaluation document, but it did not summarise all references to the self-evaluation document in the report. There are other significant points at which relevant comment appears in the reports, in particular where disagreement with claims made in an institution's self-evaluation is noted, which this paper identifies and discusses. This is followed by an analysis of discussion in the audit reports of the areas in which institutions are noted to have reflected critically on their own arrangements in the self-evaluation document, which indicates what a cross section of institutions considered as priorities for enhancing the quality of their provision and arrangements for maintaining academic standards.

## Features of good practice

9 At the beginning of the transitional institutional audit process in 2002, QAA took the view that since a prime characteristic of features of good practice should be their potential for transferability (internally or to other institutions), the self-evaluation document would not ordinarily be considered as a possible feature of good practice. Consequently, in only one case in the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 was a feature of good practice formally identified in connection with the self-evaluation document:

- the exemplary institutional self-evaluation document which provided comprehensive, accurate and self-critical reflection of the University's policy, practice and procedures [University of Worcester; paragraph 250 i, paragraph 244].

10 However, in order to indicate which aspects of self-evaluation documents were considered particularly worthy of note, a further four comments which, while they did not develop into formally identified features of good practice in the respective audit report, are nonetheless strikingly positive in tone, are also listed here:

- overall, the team concluded that the SED provided good evidence of the College's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to use the outcomes of that reflection effectively in the management of quality and academic standards [Harper Adams University College; paragraph 185]
- the form and content of the SED, and the process by which it had been written and approved, provided evidence of the College's ability to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to bring a high degree of institutional self-awareness to the process of change [Heythrop College; paragraph 194]
- [the self-evaluation document] also described, and critically evaluated, the key elements of these processes [to manage its quality and standards], identifying their strengths and limitations and the ways in which these had been or are planned to be acted upon to enhance quality and standards assurance. Overall, the SED conveyed the impression of a mature, self-critical organisation committed to continuous enhancement [University of Ulster; paragraph 210]
- the SED provided good evidence of the University's capacity to reflect upon its strengths and limitations and to act upon these to enhance quality and standards [University of the West of England, Bristol; paragraph 249].

11 *Outcomes...* papers also commonly identify aspects of the topic which have led to recommendations for action on the part of the institution concerned. No such recommendations were uncovered in respect of self-evaluation documents, although a number of such documents were subject to critical comment in the audit reports, and these comments are discussed under specific section headings later in this paper.

## The contribution of the self-evaluation document to the institutional audit process

12 In the institutional audit report in which the self-evaluation document was identified as a feature of good practice, this identification was based on the view that the 'SED prepared for this audit was exemplary in providing a clear, accurate and

comprehensive outline of the framework for quality assurance, maintenance of standards, and support of student learning. The document presented an honest and balanced view of the University's procedures and was self-reflective in assessing strengths and limitations' [University of Worcester paragraph 244]. In this respect, the self-evaluation document met all the requirements articulated in the *Handbook*, and, by implication, it materially assisted the conduct of the audit.

13 In the other examples cited above where the self-evaluation document was described in particularly positive terms, the comments in the audit reports focus on how the self-evaluation document had illustrated the institution's capacity for self-evaluation, as a reflection of the confidence which could be placed in the institution's present and likely future management of quality and standards, and its facility to identify opportunities for improvement.

14 Audit teams were also asked to evaluate the adequacy and accuracy of the statements made by institutions in their self-evaluation documents when describing, analysing and coming to a view on the effectiveness of the institutional arrangements to which they related. It is therefore possible to analyse comments made in the audit reports about the degree to which an individual self-evaluation document was self-evaluative (or self-critical, self-reflective or analytic - the terms appear largely interchangeable), accurate and comprehensive. However, it should be noted that the comments in the reports on these matters, particularly with regards to comprehensiveness, can refer to either the self-evaluation document only, or include the supporting documents to which it served as a pointer.

15 In over half of the 57 reports analysed in this paper, the self-evaluation document was considered both accurate and self-evaluative; and in almost all the remaining cases it was described as wholly accurate but only partially or not at all self-evaluative. In only a very few reports was the self-evaluation document reported to be self-evaluative but not wholly accurate, or neither accurate nor self-evaluative. A comment on the comprehensiveness of the self-evaluation document is made in nearly half the audit reports. Two-thirds of these references were positive and one-third negative. However, where a report comments that the self-evaluation document is not comprehensive, this is almost never interpreted as an attempt at concealment. Instead, it is taken as an indicator of an institution's inability to explain itself and its procedures clearly and fully to informed outsiders. In fact, in almost a quarter of the reports, omissions were said to have led the institutions concerned to fail to do themselves justice in their self-evaluation document.

16 Further analysis of these data reveals a positive correlation between a comment that the self-evaluation document fulfilled its purpose in the audit process in terms of its accuracy and evaluative character and a reference to comprehensiveness. Two-thirds of the audit reports which described the self-evaluation documentation as 'comprehensive' also described it as 'accurate and self-evaluative', while in the remaining third, the self-evaluation document was 'wholly accurate but only partially (or not at all) self-evaluative'. Conversely, three-quarters of the small number of reports which identified the self-evaluation document as 'not comprehensive' also fell in the category of 'wholly accurate but only partially (or not at all) self-evaluative'.



17 It is possible to identify a number of themes among the reasons cited as to why, in a small number of audit reports, a self-evaluation document was not considered comprehensive. In the majority of cases, the reasons were specific to the institution. However, the topics of an institution's response to external reviews (including the previous institutional audit) and matters associated with postgraduate research students recurred in more than one report, while a further three topics only occur in a single report, but appear nevertheless to have potentially wider applicability. These were support for international students, provision of teaching quality information and management information systems.

18 It is also notable that several audit reports which described the self-evaluation document as accurate and self-evaluative nevertheless identified omissions in respect of information and communications technology. In one report it was noted that 'the SED might have been fuller and more precise about some of the [institution's] broad visions and strategies, for instance its general IT strategy, including the development of the VLE'. In another case, the report considered that the institution 'might have gone further in describing overarching strategies, for example, for information technology and communication' in its self-evaluation document, a view that was reiterated elsewhere.

19 A number of audit reports include comments under the heading 'the utility of the SED...' in relation to aspects of the institution's quality assurance and enhancement framework. In one case, where the self-evaluation document was considered both accurate and self-evaluative, there was nevertheless a problem of clarity: there were 'areas in the SED which were unclear to the audit team, especially the relationships between the Quality Office and the [unit responsible for academic standards]'. In another report, the self-evaluation document was described as neither accurate nor self-evaluative and '[t]he discussion of governance and management arrangements [it] contained was rather brief and unclear, and rather little information was provided about such key areas as the [institution's] intentions for the enhancement of teaching and learning'.

20 In several other audit reports, the self-evaluation document was judged to be accurate but not wholly self-evaluative in this regard. For example, one self-evaluation document had omitted to address 'how the newer elements in [the institution's] quality management arrangements are intended to work together and with more established elements', while another 'did not provide a fully reflective discussion of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the institution's processes in relation to quality management and enhancement'. In connection with a further self-evaluation document, the relevant report noted that it 'did not fully engage with an evaluation of the effectiveness of the [institution's] procedures for the management of its quality and standards'. In another report, it was noted that the self-evaluation document did not take 'full advantage of the opportunities afforded to demonstrate how its enhancement policies emerge from self-reflection, feedback and analysis', while another 'was not cast in the philosophy of a quality enhancement approach, offering little feeling of a thoughtful approach to following through loops, and seeking to improve effectiveness'.

### **Instances where audit reports disputed claims made in self-evaluation documents**

21 In most of the 57 institutional audit reports analysed in this paper, the self-evaluation document was considered to be predominately accurate and evaluative. On the whole, therefore, the self-evaluation document was viewed as fulfilling its intended role in the audit process, by providing an introduction to the institution and setting out the views of the latter which could be tested against the evidence available to the audit team. Positive comments were made in audit reports when a high level of consonance was found between the claims made in the self-evaluation document and the audit team's experience of the institution. Nevertheless, a significant number of instances can be identified where a report disagreed with a claim made in the self-evaluation document on a particular aspect of the institution's arrangements. (The following discussion does not include the examples mentioned in paragraph 15 where institutions were considered not to have done justice to themselves.)

22 The most common areas in which audit reports disagreed with a claim made in a self-evaluation document were in relation to the following: approval, monitoring and review processes; aspects of relations with students; and the use of the Academic Infrastructure.

23 In relation to approval, monitoring and review processes, most examples concerned claims that monitoring procedures were fully operational. In one report, in response to the claim that the institution 'had operated a system of academic audit since 1998 in the form of a compliance check on quality practices at local level' it was noted that the approach in fact 'operated only sporadically and had been in abeyance'. In another institution, a range of problems was uncovered with the institution's annual monitoring procedure, while in a further report, a claim that periodic review occurred quinquennially was rejected on the grounds that in reality the timing was at the discretion of faculty management, and a claim that external involvement was necessary was rejected when it was found that such involvement was simply a 'normal' expectation. In another report, a claim that the institution undertook module and programme evaluation in the form of action research enquiries was rejected on the ground that it was supported by examples which were neither reliable nor representative.

24 Other examples in relation to this topic include an assertion in the self-evaluation document that no new programmes had recently been submitted for approval. This was found to be incorrect, with a consequent failure to mention one programme that had 'raised serious concerns' when discussed at the relevant institutional committee; and a complaint from another institution that 'external involvement in the approval process for variants was seen to be onerous' which the audit report noted was not justified.

25 A number of claims made by institutions in their self-evaluation documents about their relationships with their students were subsequently rejected in the relevant audit reports. In several cases these matters related to electronic communication. As an example of this, a claim by one institution that it was 'responsive to the needs of diverse groups of learners' was doubted by the relevant audit team on the grounds that it had found that the institution's virtual learning environment was 'rather patchy

and of variable quality'. In another case, an institution with a considerable number of distance learning students was found to have put an unjustifiably positive gloss in its self-evaluation document on a project to implement a student-to-student network, the introduction of which was found to have been subject to 'significant delays'. In a further case, an institution's self-evaluation document claimed that 'effective and high quality systems of academic support and guidance [were] in place' where the audit team found that student support was dependent on staff commitment rather than clear procedures.

26 In several cases where self-evaluation documents made claims for the manner in which the institution had engaged with the Academic Infrastructure, audit reports subsequently questioned the accuracy or completeness of the institution's view. For example, one report recorded that a claim that an institution's internal code was aligned with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), published by QAA, was undermined by some complex assessment arrangements. In other examples, the disagreement related to how aspects of the Academic Infrastructure had been embedded in institutional procedures. One report noted that 'the claim of the SED that the *Code of practice* is an "integral part" of the [procedure was] not always fully justified'. Another report found that minutes of validation meetings did not always refer to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* or subject benchmark statements, although the self-evaluation document had claimed that 'validation is intended to give the institution assurance on the relationship between proposed programmes'.

27 In addition to claims connected to approval, monitoring and review processes, relations with students and institutions' engagement with the Academic Infrastructure, a small number of audit reports questioned the accuracy of claims made in institutions' self-evaluation documents in the areas of engagement with employers and the use of management statistics. In one instance linked to engagement with employers, the report stated that 'although external academic involvement in the [institution's periodic review] process is sound, the team saw less evidence of employer involvement [in the process], for which a claim is made in the SED'. In another report, it was noted that a claim was made in the self-evaluation document that 'schools are encouraged to engage with their alumni for a variety of purposes, including the currency and relevance of their degrees for employment'. The audit found, however, 'little evidence to suggest that such activity was systematically carried out by schools, or that it had been used to inform changes to the curricula'. With respect to institutions' use of management statistics, a few audit reports found that claims could not be substantiated. In one case this related to whether data was actually monitored by a senior committee and in another to the interpretation of figures on retention.

### Self-critical comments in institutional self-evaluation documents

28 In most of the 57 institutional audit reports analysed in this paper there is some reference to comments made in the self-evaluation document in which the institution reflects critically on its own activity. This is unsurprising, given the intention of the institutional audit process that the self-evaluation document would not only highlight

areas the institution considered to be a strength, and aspirations for enhancement, but also discuss challenges which had yet to be resolved. In the following sections, this paper identifies the key areas of institutional activity where the audit reports stated that institutions' self-evaluation documents had identified matters that the institution viewed as requiring attention. Exploring these comments sheds light on institutional preoccupations in managing learning opportunities and academic standards. But the comments cited also help to show the degree of incisiveness present in many institutions' self-evaluation documents. Taken together, they give substance to a claim often made by institutions that their preparations for audit (including their self-reflection, the outcomes of which are captured in the self-evaluation document) represent one of the principle ways in which they benefit from the audit process.

29 Institutions' self-critical comments in their self-evaluation documents cover a broad range of topics, but a large proportion can be considered to fall under two main headings:

- quality management and practice
  - management information systems
  - approval, monitoring and review
  - Academic Infrastructure
  - responding to external interests
- communication with students
  - student feedback procedures
  - student representation
  - academic and personal guidance and learning support resources
  - postgraduate research students.

30 A number of reports also contain self-critical comments about staff development arrangements. Lastly, a small number of self-critical comments are noted as relating to external examiners and assessment. All of these topics are the subject of other papers in *Outcomes... Series 1 and 2*, where the ways in which institutions are responding to the challenges identified in their self-evaluation documents and encountered elsewhere are discussed in greater detail (a full list of *Outcomes... Series 2* papers is given in Appendix 3, page 21).

### Quality management and practice

31 A significant proportion of the self-critical comments made by institutions in their self-evaluation documents related to various aspects of quality management and practice. Almost all of those comments which dealt with this topic were concerned with improving efficiency and clarity. Some of these self-criticisms can be considered as of general applicability, illustrated by the comment that the self-evaluation document 'recognised...that [the institution's] quality assurance and management processes had not previously worked as effectively or transparently as it now believed they were doing, and further acknowledged that "although a great deal has been achieved,

much remains to be done", while others were more specific in focus. Other examples related to different aspects of recording decisions. For example, one institution was reported to have acknowledged in its self-evaluation document 'the need to record more comprehensively the reporting of responses to issues', while others commented on the variable quality of documents intended to record information, including programme-level journals and programme evaluation documents.

32 Several audit reports noted that institutions had reorganised their deliberative structures and were working to embed new procedures. For example, one report noted that the self-evaluation document 'recognised the need to monitor and adapt, as appropriate, the comparatively recent innovations made to the [institution's] internal quality assurance and enhancement processes'. Another self-evaluation document was reported to have noted 'that it had "proved difficult to keep track of implementation of a complex series of planned actions, some of which [might] no longer be relevant in the revised structures"'. In relation to collaborative provision, one institution was reported to have acknowledged "significant operational challenges", particularly the alignment of teaching and examinations at partner organisations and the [institution]'; a federal institution moving to an increasingly devolved structure was recorded to have made a similar point.

33 On the other hand, for several institutions the challenge was expressed in terms of ensuring that the structures were understood internally, for example in a case where the self-evaluation document 'acknowledged that the [institution] could be more proactive in making the framework for quality assurance and standards more accessible to academic staff'. For other institutions the challenge lay in disseminating good practice; one self-evaluation document was noted to have 'offered a frank evaluation that more could be done to promote the dissemination of good practice, although this recognition was not accompanied by an action plan to address the matter'.

### **Management information systems**

34 The most common topic on which institutions are noted in the audit reports to have made a self-critical comment in their self-evaluation document is management information systems. About half of the comments in the audit reports on this topic refer to institutions' acknowledgements of the limitations of their own management information systems, while most of the remainder discuss the challenges encountered in making better use of reliable data from their information systems.

35 Several large institutions that were grappling with the consequences of mergers noted in their self-evaluation documents that they were experiencing problems with their management information systems. However, since the difficulties of merging disparate information systems or bringing outdated systems up to date could also be encountered by unitary institutions, the significance of merger should not be exaggerated. In addition, several institutions inferred, or explicitly stated, that the existence of multiple and/or ineffective information systems 'led to a lack of confidence in centrally held data'. In other cases, the problems were more localised and appear to result from irregular admission and progression patterns in particular areas of the institution challenging systems geared to the undergraduate term. One small specialist institution acknowledged that the use of statistical data was itself an innovation, so that while its self-evaluation document 'described the use made by

the [institution] of statistical data as being "in its infancy", it nonetheless considered that 'a start has been made' in addressing a matter with which it had not made significant progress for some years.

36 Challenges in ensuring the utility of their information systems that were identified by institutions in their self-evaluation documents tended to concern administration rather than reliability. For example, one report noted that a self-evaluation document had recognised that 'there were still concerns about the consistent use of data'. Discussing this matter with teaching staff the audit team was told 'that data were not always presented to them in forms that they found useful at programme or module level'. At another institution, the self-evaluation document 'recognised that more needed to be done to improve feedback loops at all stages of the process, in particular to staff at module and programme levels and stated its intentions to utilise subject managers more to this end'. Another self-evaluation document accepted that there was 'scope for improvement in the timeliness of the production of statistical data concerning student progression and achievement, as well as in the use which is made of such data'.

37 In a small number of audit reports, institutions' problems with management information systems were explicitly identified as existing at departmental (or equivalent) level. In one case, the self-evaluation document was reported to be of the view that there was further scope at school, departmental and programme levels for 'increased use of [management information systems] in order to follow through issues that arise from the annual monitoring and other review processes'. In another case the self-evaluation document was reported as having stated that while 'faculties are responsible for holding and updating definitive documentation...some concerns remain about the maintenance of accurate module records'. In a further case, the self-evaluation document 'acknowledged that there is likely to be variable general understanding of what constitutes progression, retention and completion within the institution and that programme leaders are in need of further training/guidance in analysing data'.

### **Approval, monitoring and review**

38 A significant number of audit reports referred to critical comments in self-evaluation documents about institutions' own approval, monitoring and review arrangements. In respect of the approval of new provision, one such comment related to the complexity of arrangements where negotiations between autonomous internal partners and external validation were involved. In another case, the critical comments in the self-evaluation document related to the existence of procedural ambiguities in approving a new minor award.

39 Other audit reports noted comments in self-evaluation documents about the reluctance of faculty and school boards to give rigorous scrutiny to programme proposals mainly involving the repackaging of existing units and the inefficiency and cumbersome nature of an over-elaborate procedure. Self-critical comments in relation to annual monitoring included the variability of documentation and weakness of action plans and the limited nature of institutional oversight in a heavily devolved institution. In connection with periodic review, institutions were noted as drawing attention to timetabling slippages and the fact that, as a new (or changed)



procedure, periodic review was 'less well established than some' or in need of evaluation and refinement.

### Academic Infrastructure

40 A few audit reports noted self-criticisms in self-evaluation documents in respect of institutions' engagement with the Academic Infrastructure. These comments included various difficulties with programme specifications; a lack of engagement with a particular section of the *Code of practice* and an admission that an institution 'needed to further develop its approach to level descriptors'.

### Responding to external interests

41 A few institutions were reported to have acknowledged in their self-evaluation document a degree of tardiness or lack of systematisation in responding to the recommendations of external reports including those of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. There were also a small number of self-criticisms in respect of feedback from non-student stakeholders, such as employers and graduates, which all noted that, in spite of some good practice, there was 'some variability in the application of the systems'.

## Communication with students

### Student feedback procedures

42 The other main topic of self-critical comments as noted in the audit reports was institutional communication with students. In the area of student feedback procedures, one institution noted problems in collecting information from students and described a desire to enhance the system by augmenting questionnaires with other means of 'securing cohort views on programmes and modules' and improving the response rate as well as improving the manner in which the institution reported back on action taken. Another report noted that the self-evaluation document 'referred to the particular challenges of combined honours programmes and to the difficulty of identifying the combined honours experience through the programme-level feedback'. In another example, it was noted in the report that the institution perceived that it had some way to go in balancing the delegation of authority for collecting feedback with achieving the effective central monitoring of student views.

### Student representation

43 Student representation on deliberative committees was also the subject of self-critical comments in a number of audit reports with the comments relating to both operational issues and the desire of the relevant institutions to improve the attendance and commitment of their students. In terms of operational issues, one report noted the challenges facing a multi-campus institution. In another report it was recorded that the institution had noted in its self-evaluation document that it was 'aware of students' concerns about its representation arrangements' and indicated that it had begun to address them. In other reports, self-criticisms related to variability of practice in securing student representation. Difficulties described in self-evaluation documents with improving attendance and commitment were often related to local variability, but one institution identified specific issues relating to timetable clashes,

and another institution with a large number of postgraduate students mentioned conflicting employment commitments.

### **Academic and personal guidance and learning support resources**

44 The self-critical comments reported to have been made in self-evaluation documents relating to academic guidance and learning support resources covered a variety of themes. These included improvements in electronic or virtual learning support resources, placements, feedback on assessed work and induction arrangements as well as general information and responding to the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse student body.

45 The majority of the small number of self-critical comments on the topic of personal support for students concerned variability of provision. In one institution this was expressed as 'aspects of the personal support and guidance' which 'could be strengthened' and in another the self-evaluation document noted that 'drift' had occurred in spite of the existence for some time of 'a policy and comprehensive notes for guidance on the provision of personal tutoring'. Difficulties relating to personal development planning, students with special needs specific to the mode of delivery, and students on joint honours and combined studies programmes were also raised.

### **Postgraduate research students**

46 A small number of institutions reflected in their self-evaluation document on challenges relating to research students. In some cases this was in connection with management information systems as discussed in paragraph 32 of this paper, but other audit reports noted comments in the self-evaluation document about institutional arrangements to support such students, whether through a bespoke graduate school or through faculty graduate school committees, which were felt to be unsettled, even in research-intensive institutions with extensive experience of postgraduate supervision.

### **Staff development**

47 A further topic which was noted in the audit reports to have given rise to a significant number of self-critical comments was staff development and appraisal. Many of the comments were concerned with the latter, in terms of failure to achieve comprehensive coverage. One institution was reported to have noted in its self-evaluation document that some staff were not 'fully committed to the appraisal process' and another institution acknowledged criticisms from staff that 'the pro forma was "rather cumbersome"'.

48 Other self-criticisms in self-evaluation documents relating to staff development included, alongside institution-specific issues, identified knowledge gaps relating to, for example, the 'language of standards and quality' and internal policies and procedures. Other institutions were reported to have noted problems with policy implementation, including the inadequacy of a certificated course for new staff, patchy implementation of probation arrangements, and lack of coordination in arrangements for staff development itself and, more specifically, peer observation. A number of audit reports noted that institutions had referred to challenges in stimulating interest for staff participation in development activities.



### External examiners and assessment

49 The audit reports record only a few self-criticisms in self-evaluation documents associated with academic standards. In connection with assessment, a small number of self-criticisms were noted, which concerned, for example, the need to systematise undergraduate marking schemes across the institution and an expressed disappointment at student outcomes. There were also a small number of self-critical comments in relation to external examiners, which concerned inadequacies in following up recommendations in external examiners' reports, the support or training of external examiners and disappointment at the low return of external examiner summary reports, which were, at the time, required for teaching quality information purposes.

### The findings of this paper compared with its counterpart in the first series of *Outcomes...* papers

50 The topic of this paper was also the subject of a parallel paper in the first series of *Outcomes...*, which analysed the 70 institutional audit reports published by November 2004. The research methodology for the two papers differs slightly, but there is enough similarity for the contents of the two papers to be compared to each other.

51 In both series, the audit reports only contained a small number of features of good practice relating to the self-evaluation document (two in Series 1 and one in Series 2), although these could be set alongside a number of particularly positive comments on the topic. As noted in paragraph 9, the self-evaluation document was not ordinarily considered to be an area in which a formal feature of good practice would be identified.

52 In both series, around half of the self-evaluation documents were described in the audit reports as both evaluative and accurate. On the other hand, whereas in the first series no self-evaluation document was considered both non-evaluative and inaccurate, in the present paper two reports describe the self-evaluation document in such terms.

53 Many audit reports in both series described self-evaluation documents in terms such as 'frank', 'honest' and 'self-critical'. While in a few cases institutional self-criticisms of arrangements for quality and academic standards were found to have overstated either the deficiencies or the strengths of institutional arrangements, such comments appeared in only a minority of reports in both series. In the large majority of cases no significant disparities were found between claims made in the self-evaluation document and the reported findings of the audit.

54 In both papers a study was made of the areas which were noted in the audit reports to have given rise to institutional critical self-evaluation or self-criticism. The most common topics for these self-critical comments in both series were communication with students and quality management. In the first series, the majority of self-criticisms related to the former topic, whereas in this paper this accounted for about a third. In contrast, in this paper, about half of the self-criticisms related to quality management, with a significant proportion relating to management information systems. In the first series, comparable comments were noted, but the area of approval, monitoring and review attracted the greatest emphasis. More self-critical comments relating to staffing and staff development were discussed

in the reports of the first series than the second, but in both papers very few self-evaluation documents were reported as being self-critical about standards-related concerns such as external examiners and assessment.

55 On the whole, the audit reports analysed in this paper indicate that the self-evaluation document served its purpose in the institutional audit process. The self-evaluation document provided an introduction to the institution and set out a picture which could be tested against the evidence available to the audit team. In doing so, it illustrated an institution's capacity for self-evaluation, as a reflection of the confidence which could be placed in the institution's present and likely future management of quality and standards and its facility to identify opportunities for improvement.

## Appendix 1 - The institutional audit reports

### Note

In the period covered by these papers a number of institutions underwent a variety of scrutiny procedures for taught degree awarding powers, university title and research degree awarding powers. Reports of the individual scrutiny processes were provided to QAA's Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers, and its Board of Directors, and formed the basis for advice to the Privy Council on the applications made by the respective institutions.

In most cases the scrutiny processes also provided information which, in the form of a bespoke report, QAA accepted as the equivalent of an institutional audit report. Only those reports which conform to the general pattern of the institutional audit reports are included in the list below.

### 2004-05

City University  
 Cranfield University  
 University of Hull  
 University of Leicester  
 University of Newcastle upon Tyne  
 University of Nottingham  
 The Queen's University of Belfast  
 University of Surrey  
 University of Ulster  
 Goldsmiths College, University of London  
 Queen Mary, University of London  
 Royal Holloway and Bedford New College (Royal Holloway, University of London)  
 University of London  
 University College London  
 Birkbeck College, University of London  
 Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine (Imperial College London)  
 St George's Hospital Medical School  
 University of Derby  
 De Montfort University  
 University of Gloucestershire

University of Hertfordshire  
Sheffield Hallam University  
University of Huddersfield  
Kingston University  
London Metropolitan University  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
Liverpool John Moores University  
University of Luton<sup>1</sup>  
University of Northumbria at Newcastle  
Oxford Brookes University  
University of Plymouth  
Staffordshire University  
London South Bank University  
University of Sunderland  
University of Teesside  
University of East London  
University of the West of England, Bristol  
University of Westminster  
Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College<sup>2</sup>  
Canterbury Christ Church University College<sup>3</sup>  
University of Chester  
Liverpool Hope University  
University College Winchester<sup>4</sup>  
Henley Management College<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Now the University of Bedfordshire

<sup>2</sup> Now Buckinghamshire New University

<sup>3</sup> Now Canterbury Christ Church University

<sup>4</sup> Now the University of Winchester

<sup>5</sup> Now merged with the University of Reading

2005-06

University of Manchester

Courtauld Institute of Art

Heythrop College

University of London External System

London School of Economics and Political Science

The University of Bolton

Thames Valley University

University of Central England in Birmingham<sup>6</sup>

University of Worcester

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Dartington College of Arts<sup>7</sup>

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

---

<sup>6</sup> Now Birmingham City University

<sup>7</sup> Now part of the University College Falmouth

## **Appendix 2 - Reports on specialist institutions**

### **2004-05**

Birkbeck College, University of London

Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine (Imperial College London)

St George's Hospital Medical School

Henley Management College

Harper Adams University College

Conservatoire for Dance and Drama

American InterContinental University - London

### **2005-06**

Courtauld Institute of Art

Heythrop College

University of London External System

London School of Economics and Political Science

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Dartington College of Arts

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

### **Appendix 3 - Titles of *Outcomes from institutional audit papers, Series 2***

In most cases, *Outcomes...* papers will be no longer than 20 sides of A4. Projected titles of *Outcomes...* papers in the second series are listed below in provisional order of publication.

*Outcomes...* papers currently available can be found on QAA's website at [www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement)

#### **Titles**

Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and academic standards

Progression and completion statistics

Learning support resources (including virtual learning environments)

Assessment of students

Work-based and placement learning, and employability

Programme monitoring arrangements

Arrangements for international students

Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

Recruitment and admission of students

External examiners and their reports

Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports

Institutions' arrangements to support widening participation and access to higher education

Institutions' support for e-learning

Specialist institutions

Student representation and feedback

Academic guidance, support and supervision, and personal support and guidance

Staff support and development arrangements

Subject benchmark statements

The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Programme specifications

Arrangements for combined, joint and multidisciplinary honours degrees programmes

The adoption and use of learning outcomes

Validation and approval of new provision, and its periodic review

The self-evaluation document in institutional audit

The contribution of the student written submission to institutional audit

Institutions' intentions for enhancement

Series 2: concluding overview



## Appendix 4 - Methodology

The analysis of the institutional audit reports uses the headings set out in Annex H of the *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002) to subdivide the Summary, main report and Findings sections of the institutional audit reports into broad areas. An example from the main report is 'The institution's framework for managing quality and standards, including collaborative provision'.

For each published report, the text is taken from the report published on QAA's website and converted to plain text format. The resulting files are checked for accuracy and coded into sections following the template used to construct the institutional audit reports. In addition, the text of each report is tagged with information providing the date the report was published and some basic characteristics of the institution ('base data'). The reports were then introduced into qualitative research software package, QSR N6®. The software provides a wide range of tools to support indexing and searching and allows features of interest to be coded for further investigation.

An audit team's judgements, its identification of features of good practice, and its recommendations appear at two points in an institutional audit report: the Summary and at the end of the Findings. It is only in the latter, however, that cross references to the paragraphs in the main report are to be found, and it is here that the grounds for identifying a feature of good practice, offering a recommendation and making a judgement are set out. These cross references have been used to locate features of good practice and recommendations to the particular sections of the report to which they refer.

Individual *Outcomes...* papers are compiled by QAA staff and experienced institutional auditors. To assist in compiling the papers, reports produced by QSR N6® are made available to authors to provide a broad picture of the overall distribution of features of good practice and recommendations in particular areas, as seen by the audit teams.

**The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education**

Southgate House  
Southgate Street  
Gloucester  
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000  
Fax 01452 557070  
Email [comms@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:comms@qaa.ac.uk)  
Web [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

QAA 278 02/09